FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
DECEMBER 24, 2002

CHRISTMAS EVE
John M. Buchanan

We never left the place where we were born.
Have only lived one day, but every day,
Have walked a thousand miles yet only worn
The grass between our work and home away...
Tonight for the first time the prison gates
Have opened.
Music and sudden light
Have interrupted our routine tonight,
And swept the filth of habit from our hearts.
O here and now our endless journey starts.

W.H. Auden
For the Time Being, A Christmas Oratorio
The Shepherds

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON
DECEMBER 24, 2002

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 98
Luke 1:26-35, 38

Sometime during the week before Christmas it occurs to me that this is the year I may not have enough time to do everything I think I must do before the day, or this moment (8:00 p.m. or 11:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve, to be precise) arrives.

There is simply too much to do, and not enough time to do it: gifts to purchase and wrap. It's the wrapping, frankly, that puts me over the edge. I'm not only not very good at it, but over the years, I've noticed that I'm not improving—I'm getting worse. So, I put it off until the very last minute. In any event, there are gifts to choose, purchase, and wrap, cards to address, notes to write, telephone calls to make, parties to attend, lunches and dinners. Every year I'm reminded of and look up and read W. H. Auden's wonderful lines near the end of his *Christmas Oratorio.* There is plenty of food left over, the day after Christmas, Auden writes, not that anybody's hungry—

> Having drunk such a lot,
> stayed out so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
> to love all our relatives, and in general grossly overestimated our powers . . .

For those of us in the religion business, everything gets even more complicated, because we have to write sermons, plan services, rehearse pageants. And finally, at the end of the day on Christmas Eve, we have a problem: there are more people who want to sit in our pews at Christmas Eve than we have room for (not that we are complaining). Regulars become testy when they can't sit in their favorite pews. Every year someone calls to tell us they've been coming to "midnight mass" (a dead giveaway that they aren't Presbyterian) at Fourth Presbyterian Church for years and could we please save eight seats up front, for after their dinner at the Drake? (I thought about calling over to the cathedral to see if there had been any lost Presbyterians—maybe we could have an exchange?) People get testy when they discover there's not only no room in the inn, but no room in their church! A few years ago, a fight broke out in the center aisle at St. Bartholomew's on Park Avenue in midtown Manhattan on Christmas Eve. So a word of thanks to our wonderful ushers, who do their best to make everybody happy and to extend the hospitality of Christ to all on this holy night. And a word of thanks to those who couldn't get in and are watching on closed-circuit television in Anderson Hall. And a warm word of welcome to all—regulars and guests and everyone in between—even if you think you are celebrating Mass at Holy Name Cathedral!

Someone sent me an article last week from the Dallas Morning News with this compelling headline:

> "How to Handle the Stress of the Holidays"

That's for me, I thought. There were suggestions for reducing Christmas stress; among them

> Limit your children's wish list to three presents. Explain that Jesus received three gifts at his birth. They will accept the limit.

(And I wondered if whoever wrote that had kids or knows grandparents like Joanna Adams, who announced from this pulpit that she already had thirteen presents for Virginia, her first grandchild.)

Other suggestions:

> Prepare your calendar, schedule things and stick to your schedule!
> Accept only those invitations that mean something to you.

The final suggestion did it for me:

> Say no to the demands of others.

I found the list of suggestions so daunting that it actually increased my stress!

And in the midst of it all, a week ago, I received a note from a friend who wanted to tell me how Christmas had arrived in her life. She is a physical therapist and mother of two wonderful little girls. Her husband had been traveling all week on business, and she was trying to balance the demands of work, parenting, and preparing her home and family for Christmas. At the end of a very long and arduous day, she returned home to remember that it was the night of the Stroke Club Christmas party. The Stroke Club is one of the groups she works with and is made up of people who have suffered strokes and continue to struggle with the physical challenges, some of which are profound.

She simply didn't want to go, didn't want to cook the food, dress the girls, find the songbooks, pack it all up, and then go back out into the night, park the car, gather up the food and the girls and the songbooks, and head into the building to be charming and festive and therapeutic. But she remembered that this was Christmas for many of her patients, so she cooked the pork tenderloin, dressed the girls, found the songbooks, and somehow packed it all up and launched the Stroke Club Christmas party.

As she tells it, the girls are actually getting excited and when they arrive they are surrounded by what they affectionately and innocently call "the funny people," who are

now oohing and aaahing over the little girls and the food. It's not easy for them, the Stroke Club members. It requires a heroic physical effort to balance a cup and a plate one-handed, or use a walker and carry a cup of eggnog without tripping on the carpet.

After the meal, my friend tries to lead the singing, a cappella, of course. But it's still hard to balance a cup and a songbook when you're unable to use both hands, so she ends up singing solos. And then Cam, a woman much too young to have had a stroke, takes over, and the singing becomes lively and robust. Cam has the use of only one hand. Various people in the group take her lead and actually take turns singing solos. There is laughter and happiness.

My friend thought she experienced God at about that moment. "My eyes filled with tears," she wrote. "This shall be a sign unto you. You shall find a baby lying in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn. . . . God is exactly this experience. Love and acceptance for the outcast, the wounded, the ones who don't have any room in the inn . . . these dear "funny people"—praising God with partially paralyzed vocal chords.

"What a gift for me and the sign I had been waiting for to stir my soul again toward the Christmas story."

That's what it's about finally.

A young Jewish woman and her husband, traveling for days, to Bethlehem, her husband's ancestral home. The young woman is heavily pregnant. The journey is hard. And when they arrive, the inn is already full of other weary travelers. So they settle for the night in the stable, behind the inn. During the night, the young woman gives birth to her baby, a son. They wrap the newborn tightly with the strips of cloth they have brought along for this purpose, and they place the baby in a manger, a feed box for the cattle.

That story, we believe, is the story of God and God's love for the world. That story changes everything: changes the way we think about God, changes the way we think about ourselves, our neighbors, the whole world even.

When the child is born, all heaven breaks loose. Angels appear to shepherds watching over their flocks, and the sky is filled with light and singing:

> Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to all people of goodwill.

And then to add to the general chaos, the shepherds leave their sheep on the hillside and run to Bethlehem to see the child.

Who doesn't know and love that story and what it means and what it transforms?

God comes to us, not in dramatic displays of power but in the ordinary stuff of human life—like the birth of a child, like parents trying to make a home for their baby with

whatever they can find, like an inn full of guests enjoying hospitality and one another's good company late into the night; like shepherds— blue-collar, economically marginal, somehow sensing that something important is happening, dropping whatever it was they were doing and running to Bethlehem. God comes into our lives when love is given, when a busy therapist has a party for the Stroke Club.

It's a story about God, not only an event that happened 2000 years ago, but a story—a sign of how God continues to come into history—a story of how God intersects with human life, with your life and mine.

William Placher, in a fine new book on what the church believes about Jesus Christ and what difference it makes, says that the birth of Jesus Christ, the incarnation, changes all the rules, transforms the humanity of the least of persons. The members of the Stroke Club, the homeless woman pushing her grocery cart ahead of her, the child in Cabrini-Green spending this night alone in front of a television set; The U.S. Army corporal on watch in a remote corner of Afghanistan, the patients in the ICU, the people of Palestine and Israel, the beleaguered people of Bethlehem—what happened in Bethlehem transforms the humanity of every one of us.

And bids us to love as we have been loved.

Revel Howe wrote, "We do not find love by looking for it. We find it by giving it, and when we find love by loving, we find God. If someone asked, 'How can I find God?' I would answer, 'Go find someone to love and you will find God.'"

Who doesn't know and love the story of Bethlehem and the birth and the angels and shepherds?

But the purpose of the story is not simply to make us feel good but to change you and me, to transform us into the kind of women and men God wants us to be.

The purpose of the story is quite personal, actually. It is to tell each one of us that we are loved with an infinite love.

God's purpose is to transform you into an agent of that love and through you and me—and all who this night travel to Bethlehem—to transform our families, our neighborhoods, our cities, indeed the whole world.

> O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;
> Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
> We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
> O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel!

Amen.